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Comeback Time

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By William Safire

WASHINGTON, April 18 — The President did it his way.

He did not stand in front of the cameras, bruised and embittered, apologizing about Watergate, saying he was misled by his subordinates or otherwise pushing an alibi. He neither submitted to cross-examination nor requested television time for a long explanation.

Instead, he wrote out his announcement, read it in a cold, stern voice, and left no doubt that he had stepped up to the situation and engaged it frontally.

The reaction is one of relief. Supporters of the President are happy to see him take charge and take action; critics of the President feel profoundly satisfied about their vigorous pursuit of the Watergate affair, but not many of them want to see the Presidency itself splattered with mud. A few will gloat, "I told you so," and by their misreading of the public mind will help rally opinion behind the President.

Mr. Nixon has credentials as an investigator, long unused but still valid; like Thomas E. Dewey, that is how he first came on the scene. When this generation's version of the Pumpkin Papers was laid before him, the President switched from loyalist to pursuer.

His statement—"I condemn any attempts to cover up"—was forceful and positive; the appropriate tone for the first concession statement he has had to make since 1962. Mr. Nixon showed he has learned a lot in a decade. Contrary to Churchill's admonition, he is neither magnanimous in victory nor defiant in defeat, but he has often shown himself to be a tower of strength in a crisis. Watergate is not a significant defeat, but it was developing into one and the President moved in the nick of time.

Plenty of juicy headlines and personal tragedies lie ahead. Once a case begins to break, it breaks wide open, and when the President joins the press,

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the courts and the Senate in getting to the bottom of something, we can expect to hit new bottoms every day. A few points to keep in mind as the cloud named Watergate finally begins to burst:

1. *We Wuz Wrong.* Our political enemies and media critics, from Larry O'Brien and Frank Mankiewicz to The Washington Post's Ben Bradlee and Philip Geyelin, were right to keep the heat on the Watergate; we who worked at the White House, who were certain that nobody at a responsible level could be so stupid, now appear likely to be proven mistaken. Hats off to you fellows for hanging in there, which is more than any of you ever said to any of us when the President's bombing of Hanoi brought the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table. (Why can I never admit a mistake graciously?)

2. *No Dolchstosslegende can be made out of the Watergate.* There was no "stab in the back" that changed the course of history in any of this. Mr. Nixon would have swamped Mr. McGovern with no help from zealots; indeed, the Watergate incident provided Democrats with their only useful 1972 campaign issue.

3. *Not every hardball is a beanball.* Let's wait and see if a connection is proven between the Watergate crime and other political activity that may be shady but is not criminal. Let's also watch out for *ex post facto* morality, condemning tactics in the most recent campaign that were tacitly condoned in other campaigns. We would be better off without such "hardball" but we should not pretend it never existed.

4. *Beware of linkage.* The word in this unfolding story that should concern civil libertarians is "linked"—"So and so linked to Watergate." Linked by what, linked according to whose sworn, first-hand testimony?

In the long run, the experience of swinging wide the Watergate should prove to be uplifting. In future campaigns, some idiot may be found stuffing a suitcase full of laundered credit cards, but such behavior would be treated as aberrant and — worse — impractical.

As we flip over this flat rock we call politics, Americans of different parties and ideologies now do so together, thanks to the President's action this week; we need not don a mantle of national guilt if we see something scurrying around. Political standards are getting higher, which is something to be proud of, not ashamed of, and as we make dirty politics too costly a game to play, cleaning the Augean stables becomes a snap.

This is not a tragic moment for Mr. Nixon, nor a sad day for democracy; on the contrary, for people who want all Presidents to succeed, this is a moment to take heart. For all players in the game of politics, as well as for Richard Nixon, this is comeback time — and when it comes to comebacks, the world's leading expert has just made his appearance on the right side of the Watergate investigation.